DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 316 CS 205 830

AUTHOR Pritchard, Constance J.
TITLE Teaching Women Prisoners to Write.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 11p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills: *Correctional Education: Correctional Institutions: Educational Benefits: *Females: Higher Education: *Language Skills: *Prisoners: Program Descriptions: Speech Communication: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Courses in college composition taught as part of the University of South Carolina's program at the Women's Correctional Center in Columbia, South Carolina, (a minimum security state prison) have proved valuable to prisoners. Despite the problems encountered, including lack of cooperation from the prison administration and inadequacy of available materials, the program has been found by many inmates to be an important way to prepare to reenter society. The benefits that inmates derive from writing instruction are improved skills in communication, thinking, and semantics. The Women's Correctional Center community is very verbal, and inmates are aware of the need to adapt their language to fit varying prison situations and to express themselves clearly and carefully. Written language is also important in the prison community since it is needed for such activities as applying for privileges, appealing convictions, and writing letters. Through their training in writing skills, inmates have gained knowledge about language and words, consciousness of diction, improved persuasive writing skills, and an avenue for self-expression. The prison courses have differed from traditional courses in the writing topics chosen and in increased chances for individualized instruction. (Excerpts from inmates' writing are included.) (GT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED192316

1980 Conference on College Composition and Communication
Washington, D.C. March 13 - 15, 1980

Panel Discussion: Innovative Approaches to Accomodate Non-traditional Students

Presentation title: Teaching Women Prisoners to Write

Constance J. Pritchard

My experience in prison work began in 1974 when I did volunteer work for a summer at Trenton State Prison, a maximum security penal institution for men, in Trenton, New Jersey. Three years later, as a graduate student in the English Department at the University of South Carolina, I again became involved in prison work, this time with the Women's Correctional Center in Columbia, South Carolina. For a year and a half, I served as coordinator of the university's college courses at the Women's Center and as a teacher of various English courses within that program. However, my involvements at WCC extended beyond that of a teacher, for my master's thesis was an in-depth study of this speech community and an analysis of prison slang found in it. Without the cooperation of my students, I would have been unable to penetrate this special world.

Perhaps more than any group, incarcerated individuals need to be able to express themselves clearly and carefully in the confined and volatile community in which they live. In the next moments, I will discuss one form of communication, college composition, its purpose and problems, as I taught it behind the walls of the Women's Center.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Constance J. Pritchard

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CS205830

The University of South Carolina's college program at the Women's Correctional Center began in the summer of 1975. During the following years, the program was run by the director of Freshman English and a graduate student in the English department. From the initial course offering of English 101, the program expanded to include courses from fifteen departments at USC and the addition of supplemental programs by the Writing Lab and Communication Skills Development Center. Beginning in 1978, the program again enlarged to include men inmates from nearby male penal institutions as students. All students participating in the college program submitted applications and other necessary information for admission as did any other prospective student. Correspondence courses were also available for qualified incarcerated students.

While the USC program offered some inmates access to college courses, it did not come without a struggle. Resistance could be found in many areas: from correctional officers who were resentful of inmates' opportunities, from other inmates who harassed those in the program, and from the lack of cooperation from the administration within the prison. Other obstacles to overcome included the lack of qualified inmates to participate in the program and the difficulty in obtaining text-books and other materials needed by the students for academic courses. Other problems that instructors in the WCC college courses faced were the necessity of choosing topics which could be developed by students with limited access to library materials or other reference tools—even dictionaries were non existent. While WCC did maintain a

library, most materials in it were geared to the reading and interest level of the average inmate or about fifth grade. The students themselves faced problems in finding privacy and quiet in which to complete assignments since all women shared a small room with someone else and were restricted by regulations involving movements and sleeping times. Although classes were small, the students varied greatly in their abilities and previous academic work.

Briefly let me describe the institution in which I taught, Women's Correctional Center. Even before the beginning of the college courses, the inmates recognized the prison's educational purpose since they nicknamed it the Women's Criminal College or Women's Christian College. It is a minimum security state prison for women where there were no thick cement walls, gun towers, or barbed wire, and few barred areas. The inmates live in small separate buildings, called cottages. One inmate described WCC thus in her journal:

> Women's Correctional Center, with its modern ground story buildings, its neatly kept lawn and paved walkways, looks like any campus you would expect to see at a private school for girls. It is the only prison in the state for women; ironically it is a minimum security institution with an open campus. . . But I am an inmate who sees it as a prison with invisible bars and a fence that keeps me away from society. The painful realization that I am no longer a member of free society is one part of the invisible fence.
>
> After the initial shock of prison begins to subside, she [a newcomer] becomes more aware of her surroundings: the wide open compound, the short distance to the open woods behind the compound; escape is tempting and the desire for freedom is strong within her. She thinks about freedom and plans her escape, but a nameless force causes her to stop and think. . . I've made it through the roughest part, the ordeal and humiliation of court and conviction. My family finally accepts where I am and they are now planning for the day when I will be free to join them again. If I escape this prison,

> I won't be free; I'll be running scared until I am eventually caught. . . . I'll get more time. . . .

All women in South Carolina who must serve a sentence of ninety days or longer come to this prison. WCC houses approximately 250 inmates. Like other prisons, it is overcrowded, since it was designed for under two hundred. Racially its population is approximately equally divided, although there are slightly more blacks than whites. The ages of residents range from 17 to 62, and convictions run from repeated arrests for drunkenness to murder.

While corrections philosophy has progressed from the "hang 'em and beat 'em days," women prisoners are often neglected by rehabilitation programs. Indeed, what happens to the lifers and long timers in WCC? One woman explained the inmates' views as follows:

> There is the apparel plant and the cafeteria; there is an abundance of idle time to grow bitter, more confused and get fat from eating the heavy, starchy diet. And there is always the ever present opportunity to become involved in homosexual activities. And the opportunity to grow stagnant in mind and spirit, or just sit around and devise ways to instigate trouble for themselves, other inmates, and the officials. In turn all this makes it harder for the residents who are trying, in various ways, to offset these problems. One possible alternative . . . is education.

Educational programs available at WCC included basic education or GED training, technical courses, and the university's college program. One woman explained her views about education and rehabilitation:

> . . . the opportunity to an education does not necessarily bring about rehabiliation. Most inmates define rehabilitation as something that comes from within a person, and the causes or reasons for this 'something' are multifaceted.
>
> While some inmates feel they do not need rehabilitating, they readily recognize the fact that through continued education they can better prepare themselves to re-enter society with a

> more positive attitude and better skills as opposed to the idea of spending an indefinite number of years in prison learning nothing more constructive than how to cook and sew. In the past, it was important that women learn these simple skills. Today, women are being recognized as competent and contributing individuals by society. It is this recognition of women by concerned citizens and devoted educators that has contributed to the advanced educational program at the Women's Correctional Center. . .

Admittedly education can be beneficial to the women, but what part does composition play in helping a woman in prison and upon her return to the outside world? One of the founding teachers of the college program at WCC stated it thus:

> . . . the teaching of English as a basic skill of manipulating communicative patterns of language, of strengthening the power to distinguish meanings, and of encouraging order in the thought processes--all this is the basic philosophy underlying English 101--seems to correlate most fundamentally with procedures of social rehabilitation. . . . Above all, they [the inmates] will find help in untangling confusing thoughts and observations.

Communication, thinking, and semantics then are the benefits derived from teaching women inmates to write. Here, an inmate's comment rings true: "If you can't communicate with people you just might as well shut the door to life."

The WCC community is very verbal. The inmates themselves are especially aware of their need to be able to manipulate language in both speaking and writing. Indeed, language serves as one of the few acceptable means of release for the women. Some inmates are repulsed by the profanity and slang used in prison, and they try to avoid using both. They recognize that their stay at WCC means an adjustment to a different community with accompanying changes in personal habits and speech. One inmate wrote about the linguistic

differences she found at WCC:

> Verbal communication in my present environment is the most important. This one has some delicate rules that must be remembered and practiced at all times. Tone of voice has to be used in certain specific ways to make your words understandable. Such as: if someone asks to borrow something and you wanted to say no, you couldn't use a regular tone of voice. You would have to say 'no' harshly. . . .
>
> Another rule is to always make your words clear. If you mumble something, someone will ask you, not so nicely, what you said. It is always best to use simple language in my present community. If a word is used that another person doesn't understand and they misinterpret [it], a fight could break out.

Another inmate's comment rightly asserts that joining this speech community means adjusting to a new life, one where communication is very important: "That's a big world outside, but for everyone in here this is a mighty small world, so everything in here is magnified. In other words, an insult means more than it does on the streets, a compliment means more than it does on the streets." Indeed, language use fluctuates at WCC as one inmate described:

> . . . There are times when the women try to speak correct English and there are times when tension runs high, the women are more on edge and out of a deep need for self-expression, they use more slang and coin new phrases. Some of the phrases "make" and some do not. The majority of the language spoken in this community is heavily flavored with slang and easily adopted—if you become a permanent resident. . .

As my description has shown, WCC is a community where verbal skills are quite important and an inmate needs to be able to adapt her language to fit varying situations within each day. Such skills, it seems, can be acquired in a writing course, be it the traditional English 101 or another course designed to emphasize oral as well as written communication. But written language is also important in

the prison community. At WCC an inmate must apply in writing for privileges and advancements in custody ratings. In addition, most inmates correspond with family or friends, and many are actively appealing their convictions or filing grievances. So writing skills are important in more ways than the traditional college freshman would find them needed. Besides these opportunities for writing, several of my inmate students served in clerical or secretarial positions in WCC or other correctional institutions. These inmates came into contact with other jargons, those used by the administration and in business correspondence. By teaching written and oral communication to these women, a further benefit than preparation for future college courses resulted. With this knowledge, these inmates qualified for more prestiguous jobs within the prison and gained valuable skills and confidence which benefitted them when appearing before parole boards, returning to court, and seeking employment in work release programs while incarcerated or after leaving WCC.

Even though much of the communication at WCC is oral, rather than written, the skills sharpened and discipline developed by learning and practicing writing helped these women. As inmates have stated, word choice was extremely important in the prison community. Through writing, a student's knowledge and perception of language and words were strengthened. By learning about audience and connotation, my students became more conscious of their diction—a knowledge that would be valuable in their daily contacts with other inmates and corrections officers, in addition to any written correspondence. The mastery of the skills needed to write persuasively and argumentatively

better abled an inmate to answer a charge filed against her or plea for custody advancement, whether through writing or speaking. Likewise, a descriptive theme enabled the students to write about their surroundings with a clear purpose and perhaps from a different perspective. Ample opportunity for narration could be found in a prison setting, since all inmates could relate events and experiences foreign to the average individual.

But other assignments differed from those traditionally found in expository writing. For one paper, students interviewed a corrections officer or administrative official. Another series of assignments were reports designed for different audiences on how a sum of money could best be spent within the corrections department. Since all my students recognized that they had to adjust to a different speech community upon their arrival at WCC, exploration of how different people spoke gave them opportunity to document the differences they had observed. Revision—proofreading and editing the written product—was an important area for these students, since written materials were the only way in they were able to present themselves to some people, since they had limited access to visiting or calling others.

Other differences between this and a traditional composition course can also be found. Topics for writing, of course, varied from those given in an average freshman English class. The inmates naturally could write most prolifically about an area in which they felt they were authorities—prison and imprisonment. Thus, certain topics reappeared: sex, prison surroundings, capital punishment, religion, and the need to appreciate life and freedom. Since most of my students

were in their twenties and thirties and returning to school after a long absence, they needed to review grammatical terms. Since the classes contained students of very divergent abilities and were small, individualization of goals and problem writing areas was possible. Sentence combining exercises were helpful in review and development of sentence structure. In addition, such exercises were easily accomplished which helped these students develop confidence, something many of them lacked. Journal writing provided another opportunity for students to loosen up, although they could not be as open here as they might have wished. Journals too provided a place and opportunity for release—so needed by an incarcerated individual. Like other freshmen, my students had many of the common writing problems which result from an unfamiliarity with formal written English. Fortunately, these students brought with them an enthusiasm unequaled in English classes, and, although their opportunities were limited, a desire to read and learn. Imagine teaching a class where English 101 is the highlight of the day!

Even with this high motivation, teaching inmates to write is not without heartaches. With personal involvement with the students, it is all too easy for both teacher and pupil to lose perspective of these courses—college courses would not be the panacea for all their problems and guarantee them success upon their return to the outside world. Students needed too to realize that mastery of standard written English did not make them any "better" than anyone else—or problems could result within the prison community. On the whole, I found incarcerated women to have little sustained motivation

for higher education--the rewards of earning "good time" or money for child support made college courses a luxury. But even so, universities, corrections departments, and humanists need to consider reaching incarcerated individuals. Two final comments will help to remind us of our opportunities to teach non traditional students. Another teacher of English 101 expressed her feelings about educating women inmates this way:

> . . . since most of these women are over twenty, a college level course will provide them with an upward and forward aim necessary for successful rehabilitation and adjustment upon release. None of them will go back to high school. . . .yet a number of them might entertain hopes of going to college or to a technical school, and these hopes need encouragement in a concrete manner.

A woman inmate at WCC speaks for many others about the value of education and will serve to close my comments:

> I found one great pleasure since I've been here and that's studying. . . I never gave it a second thought when I was on the streets cause I didn't need it. Cause I always thought I would have someone to keep me up, support me, take care of me. Since I've been in prison, I've found that my education means more to me than anything else. I'd like to see other people take this opportunity. . .